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GREENPEACE RAID: MINISTER'S DENIAL

French Defense Chief Rejects Suggestions in Press That He Ordered Sabotage

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PARIS, Sept. 18 — Defense Minister Charles Hernu maintained his innocence today in the face of press reports here suggesting that he had ordered the sabotage July 10 of a ship owned by the anti-nuclear and environmentalist group Greenpeace.

He did, however, acknowledge that he had authorized a team of five agents to go to New Zealand to monitor Greenpeace's plans for protests against French nuclear testing in the Pacific.

Mr. Hernu, appearing before reporters at the Defense Ministry today, said he would be "intransigent" in his search for the truth about the affair and "pitiless" if it turned out that any member of the French Government had taken part in a cover-up.

He added that reports that the vessel had been sunk by French military frogmen constituted a slur on French military officers, who he said were being victimized by a campaign of "rumor, insinuation and calumny."

Affair Raised at Cabinet Meeting

Mr. Hernu's statement today seemed to signal a Government decision to ride out the criticism and to maintain earlier denials of official involvement or responsibility in the sinking of the Greenpeace ship, the Rainbow Warrior, in which one person was killed.

The Defense Minister's appearance before reporters this afternoon came several hours after a regularly scheduled meeting of the French Cabinet at which the Rainbow Warrior affair was the subject of "a brief exchange of views," according to the Government's spokesman, Georgina Dufoix.

Mr. Hernu spoke amid a mounting furor here over a report in Le Monde Tuesday that the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland, New Zealand, was carried out by the French intelligence service, apparently with the approval of Mr. Hernu. A Portuguese photographer aboard the ship was killed when two explosions, apparently caused by mines attached to the hull, sank the vessel as it lay berthed in Auckland harbor.

Shortly after the attack, two people, later identified as French intelligence agents, were arrested and charged in connection with the crime.

'Only Doing Their Duty'

The front-page Le Monde account, quoting sources in the intelligence service as well as Government and other officials, said senior French military and intelligence officials appear to have concealed French responsibility in the affair from a special Government investigator, Bernard Tricot. Mr. Tricot was appointed at the behest of President Francois Mitterrand to look into reported official French involvement in the affair.

"Yes, I knew it and I gave the order," Mr. Hernu said of the mission of agents of the French intelligence agency, known as the D.G.S.E., to collect information on Greenpeace. "I affirm that they were only doing their duty in defending the interests of France."

But there be no mistake, however, that there is an abyss between getting information and the attack that has been mistakenly imputed to them."

He specifically denied the assertion by Le Monde Tuesday that the actual bombing of the Greenpeace vessel had been carried out by the "third team" of two military frogmen, aided by the other French agents. The team escaped undetected from New Zealand the morning after the attack, the article said.

The report spurred new criticisms of the Government by the opposition and, in raising the prospect of an official cover-up, posed an acute embarrassment to the Socialist Government, which faces key legislative elections six months from now.

In his statement today, Mr. Hernu said that "no service, no organization belonging to my ministry received an order to carry out an attack against the Rainbow Warrior."

Press reports here for the last two months have persistently named the French intelligence agency, a branch of the Defense Ministry, as being behind the sabotage operation.

The Le Monde account Tuesday provoked a renewed political storm over an affair that had begun to recede somewhat from the public view. Banner headlines in two major newspapers today, Liberation and France-Soir, read simply "Lies," referring to the purported cover-up of the affair by French officials.

A former Gaullist Prime Minister, Pierre Messmer, said Mr. Hernu should resign. Speaking in a radio interview, Mr. Messmer, an opposition member of the French Parliament, said, "This affair no longer simply concerns Greenpeace, but a second matter, that of the functioning of the Government, of its lies and dissimulations and its refusal to take responsibility."

Commentators here said that with Le Monde's account the Greenpeace affair had taken on a new dimension, presenting the Government with the problem of responding to unambiguous accusations, made in the country's most prestigious newspaper, of concealing the truth.

Lack of Proof Noted

It seemed likely that as long as the Government was unable to furnish a convincing explanation of the attack against the ship, its denials of official responsibility in the matter would be greeted with public skepticism.

In their comments today, Government spokesmen stressed the absence in Le Monde's account of hard proof or clearly identified sources of information. The newspaper, while piecing together a highly plausible reconstruction of the Rainbow Warrior affair, was unable to identify the members of the so-called third team of French agents.

The presence in New Zealand of two other "teams" of agents had already been acknowledged in Mr. Tricot's report, which was made public last month. But Mr. Tricot concluded that the agents were on a mission to collect information about Greenpeace and that they did not blow up the Rainbow Warrior.

Moreover, new press reports today, while also asserting that the operation took place with Mr. Hernu's knowledge, contained details that varied from the Le Monde account. The news-magazine VSD, one of two to originally disclose French official involvement in the affair last month, said the "third team" was made up of three men, rather than the two claimed by Le Monde.

Reports in the New Zealand press today said that one member of the team was Louis-Philippe Dillais, the commander of a French frogmen's training center in Corsica. The Le Monde account said Mr. Dillais had remained in New Caledonia to supervise the operation.

In his statement today, Mr. Hernu said: "I have promised to establish the truth. If my orders have been contravened or I have been lied to, I will be pitiless in my sanctions, and this in the interest of the credibility of our system of defense."